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"UNCLE HO"

Let me digress for a moment to tell you something about the background of the man who now calls himself Ho Chi Minh. We believe he was born in 1890. His name at birth was probably Nguyen Van Thanh and his father was a minor Mandarin. In 1911 he left Vietnam to travel around the world as a galley boy on French merchant ships and probably visited the United States on one or more occasions. In 1913 he beached in London, took a job as a dishwasher at the Carlton Hotel, became a protege of the great chef, Escoffier, and eventually wound up as a pastry cook. During World War I he moved to Paris, eked out a living as a photographer's assistant and retoucher and spent an increasing amount of time in political agitation for Vietnamese independence. At the time of Versailles, he rented a cutaway and tried (unsuccessfully) to present President Wilson with a memorandum on the Vietnamese problem.

During this period, he began writing firey articles for the Socialist newspaper "Le Populaire" under the pen name of Nguyen Ai Quoc, which translates as "Nguyen the Patriot." (Since Nguyen is the most common of all Vietnamese family names this, in effect, comes out something like "Smith the Patriot.") Through his articles and agitational activity "Nguyen Ai Quoc" became a favorite of left-wing French intellectual circles and a member of the French Socialist Party. He attended the historic Party convention in Tours in 1920 which resulted in a majority vote in favor of the Socialist Party's adherence

to the Third International, an action that led directly to the founding of the French Communist Party of which "Nguyen the Patriot" was a charter member. He went to Moscow in 1923 and has spent the remainder of his life as an apparatchnik in the service of the Communist Party. In 1925 he showed up in Canton with the Borodin mission and during the late '20's and '30's seems to have been in charge of organizational activity throughout Southeast Asia on behalf of the Comintern. In 1930, he welded together various Vietnamese Marxist groups into what was initially called the Indo-Chinese Communist Party and is now known as the Lao Dong.

During World War II, "Nguyen the Patriot" wound up in a Chinese jail. A war lord named Chang Fa-k'uai, who wanted to improve intelligence collection and harassment activities against the Japanese in Indo-China, took him out of jail to organize the Vietnamese exiles in south China. Since the Chinese Nationalist Police had a very fat dossier on Nguyen Ai Quoc, Chang suggested a name change would be in order. Thus, in 1942, Nguyen Ai Quoc became "Ho Chi Minh" ("He Who Enlightens") and adopted the image of the venerable old, rather grandfatherly patriot he has used ever since. Beneath the wispy beard, however, there remains the same hard line Communist functionary that "Ho" has been for his entire professional life. The organization he created was called the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, or "League for Vietnamese Independence," better known by its short name of the Viet Minh.

Perhaps the best example of Ho's style of operation -- using the mask of a saintly Nationalist to cover the ruthless actions of a Communist revolutionary --

is the way he eliminated the Nationalist element within the so-called "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" (now the Hanoi Government) in the summer of 1946. At that time, the Communists were pushing the "national front" line as hard as possible to project the image of a broadly based government rather than a simple political extension of the Communist Party. Some of the Nationalist elements in the DRV, particularly ones in its Legislative Assembly, were getting out of hand and taking their roles too seriously. Primarily to lull non-Communist suspicion, Ho had given the title of Minister of Interior to a non-Communist Nationalist named Huynh Thu Khang, though the Ministry itself was, of course, run by hand-picked Party subordinates. When Ho left for France on 31 May 1946 for negotiations in Paris, he appointed the non-Communist Khang as acting President of the DRV. This act left vacant the post of Interior Minister, a vacancy Ho filled "temporarily" with Vo Nguyen Giap. As soon as Ho left, Giap began the systematic, ruthless, and entirely effective physical liquidation of most of the non-Communist Nationalist elements. When Ho returned to Hanoi he professed shock and sorrow at Giap's hot-headed excesses, but of course by then, the non-Communist Nationalists were either dead or gone and they never again constituted even a latent threat to Communist control of the DRV.